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Domestic and Personal Concerns



MEALS

Most Romans apparently took three meals a day, although we know very little about their breakfasts or lunches. In the passage below which describes a schoolboy's day, the boy has a light lunch of bread, olives, cheese, dried figs, and nuts.¹ The main meal of the day was taken in the early evening; Martial says dinnertime was the ninth hour, which would, in fact, be the late afternoon.² Dining customs and menus varied considerably, of course, depending on whether you were poor or rich, and whether you were dining alone or with guests. The upper class reclined on couches during dinner.³ It is unlikely, however, that the poor had enough space in their cramped apartments for dining couches. They probably sat on chairs or stools. And while the wealthy preferred to dine outdoors in their private garden areas⁴ when the weather was fine, the poor were restricted to their stuffy rented quarters. There was also a wide variation in the type of food eaten by people of different classes. Wheat was the main item in the diet of a poor Roman. Gaius Gracchus's legislation of 122 B.C. made the price of grain artificially low; Publius Clodius's legislation of 58 B.C. made free grain available to those who were eligible for the "grain dole."⁵ The poorest Romans ate little other than wheat, either crushed and boiled with water to make porridge or *puls*,⁶ or ground into flour and baked as bread—if they were lucky enough to have an oven available. Boiling was probably more common than baking because few poor

¹ See selection 145.

² See selection 162.

³ See note 62 of Chapter III.

⁴ *garden area*: peristyle; see selection 79.

⁵ On the legislation of Gaius Gracchus and Clodius, see the introduction to selection 169. On Clodius's sister, Clodia, see selections 75 and 76.

⁶ *puls*: This boiled wheat dish would be similar to cream of wheat cereal, grits, or couscous. Scholarly opinion is divided on the question of whether the ancient Romans made pasta noodles.

people would have their own oven.⁷ Boiled wheat or bread was not a side dish, as it is today; for many Romans it was frequently their only dish. We have already read about some of the other food items eaten by the poor: beans, leaks, and sheep lips.⁸ The wealthy, of course, could afford a wide variety of meats, vegetables, cheeses, and fruits, and the slaves to cook and serve them.⁹ Wine was the most common drink; poor people drank cheap wine or vinegar.¹⁰ Both the wine and the vinegar were mixed with water before drinking it; only at the most intemperate of parties was wine drunk straight.

A Peasant's Dinner

The following passage is taken from Ovid's long poem, *Metamorphoses*, in which he describes various mythological metamorphoses or transformations. For example, one day Jupiter and Mercury decided to find out how hospitable the people of Phrygia, a country of Asia Minor, were. They disguised themselves as needy travelers and wandered through Phrygia, knocking on doors and asking people to give them food and shelter. Again and again they were refused help. Finally they came to a tiny hovel in which lived a very poor old couple, Philemon and Baucis. But these two, though they had barely enough food for themselves, welcomed warmly the needy travelers at their door and prepared for them a dinner that was lavish by their own modest standards but would seem humble to Ovid's readers. Jupiter and Mercury were so pleased that they cast aside their disguises and revealed themselves as gods. They promised to grant the generous old couple any wish. And the couple's wish was that they die together, so that neither one would have to live alone. The gods agreed, and when their time of death was near, Philemon and Baucis were, at the same moment, transformed into trees, in which form they lived on together forever. (Ovid presents a portrait not only of generosity to strangers, but also of the marital harmony admired by the Romans.)

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Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.630-634, 646-650, 664-668, 674-678

In a tiny cottage thatched with straw and marsh reeds lived Baucis, a god-fearing old woman, and Philemon, her husband, her equal in age and piety. They had been married in that very cottage when they were young, and they grew old together in that cottage, making their poverty easier to bear by accepting it without complaint or bitterness. . . .

Baucis stripped off the outer leaves of a cabbage which her husband had picked from their well-watered garden. Philemon reached up with a forked stick and retrieved a side of smoky pork hanging from a sooty beam.¹¹ He cut off a small piece of the meat, which they had been preserving for so

⁷On breadmaking, see selection 191. Bread could be purchased at bakeries if you did not have an oven to bake your own. Perhaps some neighborhoods had communal ovens.

⁸See selection 92. In selection 207, Cato suggests that slaves be given the following food items: wheat or bread, figs, discarded olives and the dregs of fish-sauce.

⁹On food prices in the fourth century A.D., see selection 168.

¹⁰A mixture of vinegar and water, called *posca*, was regularly drunk by soldiers. Vinegar was thought to have restorative properties. In the *New Testament*, John 19.29, well-meaning soldiers provided vinegar to Jesus during his crucifixion.

¹¹The pork was hung from a beam (1) for storage in the cramped hovel, and (2) to be smoked.